



[The Story of the 'Cawdor Castle' (1920s)]

Normally our fishermen were very good at forecasting the weather conditions, without the benefit of any of the modern aids. Nevertheless, they were caught at sea in sudden and severe storms from time to time, sometimes with tragic results, in various places around our coasts. In Lochs, our fishermen were fortunate in that they operated in an area with many sea lochs where they could take shelter.

Fortunately our Calbost fishermen were never involved in any incident that led to a drowning disaster, with the exception of the drowning of the two young Morrison men at the time of the land raiding of Steimreway in 1922. However, they had some narrow escapes from time to time, and one such occasion in the 1920s was when the 'Cawdor Castle', a 73 foot Zulu sailing boat owned and operated by a Calbost crew: John Macleod 'Iain Ruadh' of 8 Calbost, Johnnie Macleod 'Seonaidh 'an Thormoid' of 6 Calbost, Donald Mackenzie 'Luns' of 12 Calbost, as well as hired deck hands, and skippered by that able and resourceful fishing skipper, Donald 'Mor' MacIennan of 18 Marvig, who was married to a Calbost lady, was caught at sea one January in a severe north westerly gale.

After hauling their herring gill-nets in pitch darkness half way across The Minch they set sail, but the force of the wind was so strong that their sail was soon torn into shreds, and as they did not carry a spare sail they were obliged to lower the massive main mast in order to reduce the roll of the boat in the heavy seas and wind. They had to try and run before the wind across The Minch towards the mainland of Wester Ross, hoping that by any means they might be able to make a favourable landfall at the entrance of one or other of the mainland sea lochs.

Meantime they set to work preparing every anchor chain and rope they had on board so as to be ready to drop all their anchors as soon as they felt reasonably sure that they were near to the land. Their survival depended on these anchors holding; otherwise they and their boat would be dashed to pieces against the inhospitable rocks of Wester Ross. At length they made a landfall but unfortunately not at the approaches of any sheltered anchorage or sea loch. At the appropriate time all anchors were dropped, and all they could do then was wait and hope the anchors would hold, while they continued to mend the sail.

In due course the wind eased a little, and a steam trawler came up to them to offer assistance. When they hauled up their anchors they discovered that all their chains had snapped, and that they were left with just one anchor attached to the spring rope, which would not have lasted much longer in a severe gale as all sea-faring men know. The trawler towed them to a safe anchorage where they spent some time repairing the sail and waiting for favourable conditions to sail back home across The Minch.

Meantime their families back home had no idea where they were, and as the days were passing without any news they had to assume the worse. They were fairly certain they were lost before the crew were able to go ashore and send a message home.

In the same gale, the Zulu sail fishing boat 'Delight' of Gravir, skippered by Donald Campbell of 13 Gravir 'Domhnuill Ruaraidh Iain', also had her sail torn to shreds in a similar manner, but fortunately they had a brand new white sail on board, which they quickly took out and rigged up while they were drifting helplessly out at sea. When eventually they got the sail ready skipper Campbell sailed her up to the shelter of the 'Creag Fhraoch', at the entrance to the anchorage at Loch Gravir, where they dropped anchor and waited for the wind to drop.

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